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STEREOTYPES OF WORKING WOMEN:

FACT OR FICTION?

by

Kirsten Hinsdale
J. David Johnson

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Stereotypes of Working Women:
Fact or Fiction

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Kirsten/Hinsdale
J. David/Johnson

Validated Instruction Associates, Inc.

Albion, Michigan 49224

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in the present study. It is concluded that, for the most part, stereotypes of working women and men are not paralleled by self-reported sex differences.

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Preface

This study is the third in a series of investigations sponsored by the Office of Naval Research and designed to determine the validity of the Hinsdale-VIA Psychosocial Model of Defeat (HVPMD, Hinsdale, 1976). The HVPMD describes in behavioral terms how the stereotypic attitudes of peers and supervisors interact with women's motivational constructs (fear of success, achievement anxiety) to produce a "cycle of defeat." The net results of this cycle are the maintenance of traditional sex roles and stereotypes in work groups. Since the feminine sex role is of dubious value in the working world (Hinsdale and Johnson, 1978b), the HVPMD in effect provides a framework for understanding how work group dynamics contribute to the achievement-related difficulties of women.

Prior to direct investigation of the model, it was necessary to conduct several preliminary studies of the frequency, severity, and implications of sex roles and stereotyping for working women and men. Toward this end, the purpose of the first unit of research was to investigate the widely held assumption that common societal stereotypes of the sexes carry over into the workplace. The purpose of the second unit was to test the assumption that masculinity is synonymous with success in the working world, while femininity is synonymous with failure. The purpose of this third unit was to determine the extent to which stereotypes are reflective of actual self-reported differences in the self-concepts of working women and men.

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Consider together two common themes in the literature on sex roles: the first states that women are victimized by societal stereotypes; the second holds that they again are victimized by their own predisposition to conform to these stereotypes.

The juxtaposition of these two themes brings into focus an understandably unpopular position--that stereotypes of women may be based on "a grain of truth" (Unger and Siiter, Note 1). Certainly, there is evidence to suggest not only that both sexes stereotype women as more emotional and less competent than men (Bem, 1974; Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Vogel, & Rosenkrantz, 1970, 1972; Jenkin & Vroegh, 1969; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974, 1975), but that many women describe themselves in a manner entirely consistent with these presumably "stereotypic" perceptions (Bem, 1974; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Given these findings, it seems quite plausible that stereotypes are not, as so often is contended, "stylized exaggerations of women and men" (O'Leary, 1977), or "shared misperceptions" (Unger and Siiter, Note 1). Instead, they

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may well reflect actual observed and generalized differences between the sexes (Terborg, 1977; Schein, Note 2).

This is not meant to rationalize the widespread subscription to stereotypes evident in our society, nor to justify their frequent use, in the absence of more specific information, as a basis for decision-making (e.g., Rosen & Jerdee, 1974). Neither is it meant to minimize the potentially devastating impact of stereotypes on women striving to break free from traditional sex roles. However, before the true nature of stereotypes can be fully understood, and before definitive conclusions can be drawn regarding their negative effects, it is necessary to test the virtually unquestioned assumption that stereotypes are, by definition, inaccurate.

Addressing this issue as it concerns working women is of particular importance, for it is in the workforce where stereotypic attitudes may have their most devastating impact. This is because high femininity consistently is associated with low status in the organizational hierarchy (Hinsdale & Johnson, 1978b; Good, Kirkland, & Grissom, Note 3). Thus, to the extent that inaccurate attributions of high femininity are made to working women, women are indeed victimized by stereotypes. Conversely, to the extent that accurate attributions of femininity are made to working women, they may be handicapped by their own personalities.

To date, several studies have established that attributions of high femininity are in fact made to working women. Our prior research on Navy populations (Hinsdale & Johnson, 1978a) showed that such stereotypes as "cries very easily," "very talkative,"

and "flatterable" were among the stereotypes ascribed to women by males, and "very submissive," "very passive," and "feels very inferior" were among those ascribed to women by females. In their study of Bell Telephone employees, Good, Kirkland, & Grissom (Note 3) reported similar findings. Some of the characteristics attributed by non-supervisors of both sexes to female subordinates were "tender," "gentle," "eager to soothe hurt feelings," and "gullible." In short, there appears to be an abundance of stereotypes of women at work.

However, little is known about whether or not the self-concepts of working women dovetail with stereotypic perceptions of them. Although this occurs in less specialized populations of females, it has been suggested that working women more closely resemble working men than they resemble stereotypes of women in general. For example, working women and men display similar needs for achievement, intellectual demands, and self-actualization (Crowley, Levitin, & Quinn, 1973), as well as similar ideals (Hinsdale & Johnson, 1978a). Both sexes derive their job satisfaction and motivation from comparable sources (Saleh & Lalljee, 1969; Wild, 1969), and with increasing experience and success in the workforce, women acquire the traits, motives, behaviors, interests, values, attitudes, and styles of leadership of successful males (Bartol, 1976; Hinsdale, Collier, & Johnson, 1978; Morrison & Sebald, 1974; O'Leary & Braun, 1972; Ruhe & Guerin, 1977; Sears, Roebuck & Company, 1974; Fitzpatrick & Cole, Note 4).

This accumulating body of evidence points to a convergence of employed males and females on a number of diverse psychological

measures, especially as they move up in the organizational hierarchy. In so doing, it creates a strong case for arguing that the workforce acts as a powerful equalizer of adult males and females--so powerful in fact, that it may supersede any internalized predisposition to conform to conventional sex roles. If this is the case, it follows that stereotypes of working women as more feminine than their male counterparts may be less than wholly legitimate.

The purpose of the present study was to determine if stereotypes of working women have any basis in reality--i.e., whether or not they are paralleled by differences in the self-reported characteristics of females and males. In keeping with the research establishing the many similarities of working women and men, it was hypothesized that the stereotypes identified in our prior data (Hinsdale & Johnson, 1978a) would have few, if any, constituents in self-reported sex differences.

Method

Sample

Subjects included 95 male and 95 female Navy enlisted personnel from Norfolk, Virginia, and Orlando, Florida. Their paygrades ranged from E-1 through E-5, with a mode of E-2. They had served in the Navy a median of 3.1 years. 95.3% had completed high school, and 30.2% had some college. 19.2% were non-white. Most of the subjects were single (70.3%); approximately one-fifth (20.8%) were married, and the remainder (8.9%) were divorced or separated. Their ages ranged from 17 to 33, with a mean of 20.2 years.

Subjects were recruited by their respective commands according to their availability for participation in the study. Together, they represented a wide range of scientific, technical, clerical and labor specialities. None was directly engaged in a combat-related position.

Instrument

The data collection instrument consisted of 68 traits from the Broverman Sex-Role Questionnaire (Broverman et. al., 1970) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974). The items from the Broverman questionnaire employed a bipolar 7-point scale on which 1 and 7 represented opposite poles on a single trait (e.g., "very gentle" and "very rough"). The unidirectional items from the Bem inventory also employed a 7-point scale, ranging from "1 = never or almost never true" to "7 = always or almost always true."

The traits included in the instrument were selected on the basis of previous research identifying them as stereotypic of the "real Navy enlisted man" or "real Navy enlisted woman" (Hinsdale and Johnson, 1978a). In keeping with the most commonly used analytic approaches to stereotyping (e.g., Bem, 1974; Broverman, et al., 1970), stereotypic traits were those (from an item pool of 138) which showed significant differences between these two "real" personalities. Of the 68 stereotypic items, 37 were derived from the Broverman Sex-Role Questionnaire and 31 from the BSRI.

Procedure

Subjects were convened in classroom settings in groups of 10 to 30. The monitor first gave them general instructions on

completing the 17 demographic items preceding the body of the instrument, and then asked them to describe themselves in relation to each of the traits in the instrument. For the Broverman items, this involved circling the number on the 7-point scale which most closely matched their self-perceptions. For the Bem items, it involved entering the most appropriate number from the BSRI scale in the blank next to each trait.

Subjects were allotted one hour to complete the task. All subjects finished in advance.

Results

To test the study hypothesis, t-tests were used to make comparisons between the self-reports of male and female respondents. It was expected that the data would show few if any significant differences between the sexes.

In keeping with this expectation, only 15 of the 68 items achieved significance. In addition, the mean discrepancy for all 68 items showed a substantial reduction from our previous data. While the average discrepancy between the "real man" and "real woman" was .60, the mean self-reported discrepancy was only .30.

The differences which emerged from this analysis are shown in Table 1. Male- and female-descriptive items are those which were significantly more characteristic of male or female subjects, respectively. In instances where the scores for male and female respondents approached opposite poles on the bipolar items, both poles appear in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Of the items in Table 1, all are in the same direction as were the stereotypes of the real man and woman, with one exception: whereas "very idealistic" was stereotypic of the real working woman, it is, according to the present study, significantly more self-descriptive of males than of females. Thus, of the 15 self-reported sex differences achieving significance, 14 correspond to previously identified stereotypes.

Beyond this 14-item overlap, however, there exist a number of stereotypes ($n = 53$) which lack constituents in self-reported sex differences. The most highly significant of these stereotypes ($p < .001$) are shown in Table 2. Classification of all significant items yielded a total of 25 male-descriptive and 44 female-descriptive items.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The results of this study lend considerable support to the hypothesis that few stereotypes of working women are based on self-reported differences between the sexes. Overall, the fact that the average discrepancy between the self-concepts of females and males was smaller than that between the stereotyped "real" sexes described in our prior research (.30 vs. .60) indicates that exaggerated perceptions of women and men may form the foundation for many stereotypes. Confirming this general conclusion is the finding that only 20.6% (14 of 68) of the stereotypic items achieved significance in the same direction as the differences

between the real man and woman. Apparently, the research community has been correct in asserting that stereotypes of working women are based on inaccurate or partially inaccurate beliefs which, because they are so widely shared, have been wrongly assumed to reflect real differences between the sexes (O'Leary, 1977).

However, there is an alternative explanation for the striking absence of sex differences in this study. It may have been in part a function of the social undesirability of many of the items (e.g., childlike, shy, impulsive). Since the social undesirability of an item is known to decrease the likelihood of its being reported as self-descriptive (Edwards, 1957), and since high femininity is more socially undesirable than high masculinity (Broverman et al., 1972; Rosenkrantz et al., 1968; Sherriffs and Jarrett, 1953), it is possible that female subjects engaged in a kind of self-flattery, thereby causing a convergence of the sexes. Other researchers have noted this tendency (e.g. Steinmann and Fox, 1974; Rosenkrantz et al., 1968).

Of the few items which did show self-reported sex differences (see Table 1), most relate to emotionality. Women described themselves, for instance, as significantly more emotional, warmer in their relations with others, and more easily able to express tender feelings. Conversely, men characterized themselves with a relative absence of emotion. These findings shed some doubt on the "stereotypic" nature of those attributions of warmth and expressiveness frequently made to women (Broverman et al., 1972). Far from being "stylized exaggerations," such attributions seem to be pointing out a fundamental distinction in the self-concepts

of women and men, even at work.

It is perhaps because of their increased emotionality--which is of dubious value in the workplace--that working women project an ideal woman even less emotional than their ideal man (Hinsdale & Johnson, 1978a). This implies that working women recognize their own higher level of emotionality and consider it to be their Achilles's heel.

However, women may not be entirely correct in assuming that emotionality is incompatible with occupational achievement. On the contrary, three of the female-descriptive items in Table 1 (sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others, and loyal) are among the 20 qualities which most strongly contribute to career advancement in both sexes (Hinsdale and Johnson, 1978b). In contrast, only one of the male-descriptive items (aggressive) is among the most adaptive characteristics in the workplace. Because of this, women who believe they must sacrifice their femininity to compete in male-dominated arenas run the risk of sacrificing many of the positive, adaptive qualities associated with their sex. Similarly, women's self-perceptions, as shown in Table 1, may be indicative of unique strengths rather than unique weaknesses.

Unfortunately, the same may not be said for the 53 truly stereotypic items which emerged from the data--i.e., those items for which self-reported sex differences were not found (see Table 2). The real woman, in being ascribed traits such as shy, quiet, neat, religious, and interested in art and literature, appears to be quite the naive introvert. Clearly, the female-descriptive items in Table 2 represent the sort of "overgeneralization" often

considered to be at the heart of stereotyping (e.g., O'Leary, 1977). That they possess many negative connotations for the working woman is intuitively evident. On the other hand, the composite picture of the real man in Table 2 also is less than flattering; stereotypes of this personality as rough, sloppy, and unaware of the feelings of others suggests an image of the real man, mildly stated, as lacking in finesse. Still, the greater proportion of female-descriptive items (44 vs. 25) indicates that women are more likely than men to be exposed to and victimized by unfounded beliefs about their sex.

From this study it may be concluded that stereotypes of working women, when compared to self-reported differences between the sexes, are largely mythical. Although the data suggest that "grains of truth" do indeed underlie some stereotypes, these grains seem to have evolved into an elaborate ideology with little, if any, basis in reality. Still, one promising implication is offered by the subjects in the present study. Unlike other samples showing the remarkable similarities of working women and men, the subjects in this study were relatively new to the workforce. Given that stereotyping diminishes with increased information (Terborg & Ilgen, 1975; Ruhe & Guerin, 1977; Schein, 1975; Good, Kirkland, & Grissom, Note 3), one might hope that they will be instrumental in making stereotypes of the sexes obsolete.

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Table 1
Self-Reported Differences in Male and Female Subjects

Male-Descriptive Items	Female-Descriptive Items	Self-Report	Real Man/Real Woman	Discrepancy
Not at all emotional**	Very emotional**	.64	.74	
Feelings not easily hurt**	Feelings easily hurt**	.70	.55	
Never cries***		1.21	1.42	
Very idealistic*		.45	.49	
Very aggressive*		.36	.39	
Feels very superior*		.43	.62	
	Very warm in relations with others**	.59	.55	
	Does not think men are superior to women**	.76	1.85	
	Sympathetic**	.54	.65	
	Sensitive to the needs of others**	.58	.77	
	Individualistic*	.68	.55	
	Loyal*	.33	.45	
	Easily expresses tender feelings*	.49	.90	
	Not at all uncomfortable when people express emotions	.47	.52	

*Significant at the .05 level

**Significant at the .01 level

***Significant at the .001 level

Table 2

Stereotypes Unrelated to Self-Reported Sex Differences

Male-Descriptive Items	Female-Descriptive Items	Discrepancy	
		Self-Report	Real Man/Real Woman
Almost always hides emotions	Does not hide emotions	.45	.85
Does not enjoy art and literature at all	Enjoys art and literature very much	.17	.85
Very rough	Very gentle*	.23	.77
Not at all aware of feelings of others	Very aware of feelings of others	.02	.75
Very sloppy in habits	Very neat in habits	.14	.75
Always sees self as running the show	Never sees self as running the show	.05	.71
	Very interested in own appearance	.13	1.00
	Tender	.17	.91
	Compassionate	.38	.87
	Sincere	.29	.78
	Theatrical	.20	.69
	Shy	.53	.68
	Very religious	.20	.64
	Truthful	.25	.61
	Very quiet	.19	.57

*This item showed significance at the .001 level on both the Broverman questionnaire and the BSRI.

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